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SUBJECT: QATARI ORGANIZATION ASSISTING IRAQI REFUGEES IN SYRIA

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador James Foley, Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugee Issues, met with the Director of Reach Out to Asia (ROTA), Omnia Nour, March 27 in Doha. As part of his tour of the region, Ambassador Foley intended to request ROTA's support for UN appeals for assistance to Iraqi refugees, primarily in Syria and Jordan. Nour surprisingly said that ROTA has already had success in assisting Iraqi refugees in Syria, particularly through education, and expects to expand its program in the future. ROTA credited its Chairperson's personal relationship with the wife of Syrian President Asad as crucial to ROTA's success in Syria. Foley also met with Salman Sheikh, Sheikha Mozah's Director for Policy and Research, to discuss possible Qatari assistance for Iraqi refugees. Sheikh thought Sheikha Mozah might be interested in providing assistance in the area of education, but acknowledged the difficulty of working this issue since Qatar had no coordinated policy on foreign aid. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) ROTA, a charitable organization financed by the Government of Qatar, is currently working in Syria for the education of children of Iraqi refugees. ROTA, through its connections with the governments of Qatar and Syria, reports that it has been successful in overcoming hurdles experienced by other international organizations. ROTA expects its education program to reach one million students through three pilot locations and virtual classrooms during the inaugural school year beginning September 2008 and expects to expend at least USD 50 million over five years, after which the organization expects the project to be continued locally.

¶3. (SBU) Nour noted that, regarding Iraqi refugees, the organization has been concentrating on those that had settled in Syria, primarily because of the "good political situation" between the two countries. Initially, when ROTA inquired about working in Syria, the Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG) requested USD 14 million that would be used to rebuild 20 Syrian schools. Upon closer inspection, however, ROTA officials noted that the USD 14 million would be used to fund an existing five-year education plan that did not include the education of Iraqi refugees.

¶4. (SBU) Instead, ROTA embarked on a plan to use community centers as schools and to expand the coverage of those schools by using virtual classrooms, with the intent to reach as many as one million students. An integral part of the plan was to hire both Syrian and Iraqi teachers, since Iraqi teachers could not be hired by Syrian schools and because the Iraqi parents would feel more compelled to send their children to schools with Iraqi teachers. Nour told Ambassador Foley this was also meant to circumvent the current practice, whereby parents would receive assistance from UNHCR when their children were enrolled in school, but then would disenroll them and have them work for the family once the aid was received. As additional incentives to keep

the Iraqi students in school, the organization plans to support Iraqi families with take-home food rations and will also include Iraqis in a project to help Syrian small business owners and farmers market their products. ROTA reached an agreement with the SARG in January for the project, after more than six months of negotiation.

¶15. (SBU) Nour told Ambassador Foley that UNHCR did not welcome the organization's presence in Syria at first. In order to show their capability to UNHCR, ROTA started its operation in Syria by successfully assisting 25 Palestinian refugee students from Iraq needing health care. These efforts were also assisted by the warm bilateral relations between Qatar and Syria, as well as "the personal relationship between ROTA's Chairperson (Sheikha Mayassa bint Hamad Al-Thani - the daughter of the Amir) and the First Lady of Syria (Asma Akhras Al-Asad)."

¶16. (SBU) According to Nour, the school project will start with three pilot community centers outside of Damascus, near concentrations of Iraqi refugees. The project is planned to begin by September to coincide with the beginning of the school year. Including the use of virtual classrooms, the pilot schools are expected to reach one million students, both Iraqi and Syrian. The project will be jointly funded by the SARG and ROTA and is expected to cost at least USD 10 million per year over five years. After five years, the project is expected to be taken over by local partners.

¶17. (SBU) Ambassador Foley remarked that ROTA had perhaps a better grassroots feel for the challenges in Syria than the international organizations, to which Nour responded, "UNHCR has no capacity for education." In reply to Ambassador Foley's question about what the U.S. could do to assist ROTA,

DOHA 00000284 002 OF 002

Nour said ROTA wanted to become involved inside Iraq and asked for points of contact. ROTA views the UNHCR assessment of needs inside of Iraq as critical to any repatriation plan and wants to participate. Nour also encouraged continued U.S. engagement on behalf of Iraqi refugees and displaced persons: "Keep in touch, cooperate, work together for the people regardless of your image. It would change your image."

¶18. (SBU) Comment: ROTA desires to remain engaged with the USG on this issue and wants to be part of the repatriation solution. Good political and personal relationships with the SARG could make ROTA successful in areas in which the USG and/or UNHCR have less leverage. Embassy Doha will remain in close contact with ROTA and Embassy Damascus to keep apprised of their progress in Syria and to assess opportunities for cooperation with ROTA. Meanwhile, Sheikha Mozah's office, which operates separately from both ROTA and the Qatari Foreign Ministry, may take an interest in this issue. Their staff is stretched thin, however, are likely to defer to ROTA if that organization is already involved in this area.

¶19. (U) Ambassador Foley has cleared this cable.
RATNEY